

40 YEARS OF TRIBAL THEOLOGY IN THE MAKING

Takatemjen

It is almost 40 years now, since the tribal theologians started writing on tribal theology.¹ In the course of all these years a lot of writings have been published and studied. Even in the BD syllabus of the Senate of Serampore College, courses on Tribal Theology have been introduced. Indeed, that is a great achievement for tribal theologians. We have come a long way in the making of tribal theology. Many discussions have taken place on tribal theology. Thanks to all those who have taken an interest and contributed to its development.

However, it is helpful to review and to critically self-evaluate any theology so that it will continue to develop and impact both the academia, the churches and the society at large. With this understanding and purpose, in this article, I will raise and attempt to answer some questions which I hope will be pertinent to the ongoing discussion on tribal theology. The questions are: What are the main concerns and issues that the tribal theologians have addressed so far? Are there any issues to be investigated further? What are the similarities and the differences between the tribal theology and liberation theology? What is the role and future of tribal theology? In order to answer these questions, some selected works of tribal theologians are reviewed in this paper in brief.

Development of Tribal Theology

Renthy Keitzar

Tribal Theological thinking began to develop in Northeast India around the 1970s. This was a time when Liberation Theology was already in the height of its development. At Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, Renthy Keitzar was the first one to openly talk of the need of developing a tribal theology.² He wrote:

It is now about 150 years (that is writing in 1973, and it is now more than 150) since the gospel message has been proclaimed in this corner of India and so the churches must be well established on solid rock, but they still live on a worn-out theology which is unintelligible and irrelevant to a tribal audience. The time has come to evolve a new theology along the line of sound biblical teaching and at the same time a message that can penetrate into the core of tribal mentality- one might call it a tribal Christian theology.³

In order to achieve this, Renthy proposed that the hermeneutical task should involve (a) taking the Bible as the norm of our faith and practice (b) the history of the church and the confessional and denominational traditions, and (c) our cultural traditions.⁴

The primary concern of Renthy in his hermeneutics of primal vision was the interpretation of the Christian traditions to the tribal mind. He gave three semantic connotations to the term 'Christian traditions'. First, it refers to the Gospel itself, second it refers to the confessional traditions and

1 From around 1970s theses and studies on Naga Cultural Traditions were beginning to appear which have a bearing on Tribal Theology, e.g. T.A.Shishak, Higher Education for Nagaland (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis. University of New York, 1973); Takatemjen, Utilising the Morung for Revitalising Naga Youth (Unpublished B.D. Thesis. Union Biblical Seminary, Yavatmal, 1976);

2 Renthy Keitzar, *In Search of a Relevant Message* (Guwahati, Christian Literature Centre, 1995) p.66-71

3 *Ibid.*, p.1

4 *Ibid.*, p.63-64

thirdly, the cultural traditions.⁵ He asserted that the Tribal thought forms, ideas, theological terms, life situations, and so on be adopted with adaptations in interpreting Christian ideas.⁶ He proposed that the tribal categories like cock, rice, mithuns, pigs and eggs, etc. be employed for explaining the Christian concept of the sacrificial act of Christ.⁷ One reason, according to Renthly which is restraining the growth of the church in Northeast India is simply “because the Christian message has not gone deep into the heart and is not fully cultured to make it relevant to the people of the North East India.”⁸ Tribal Christians need not become European or American Christians, but remain as tribal Christians maintaining the distinctiveness of one’s own culture.⁹ Taking the footsteps of Renthly, almost all the later writers of tribal theology in Northeast India has pointed out that missionaries were not sympathetic to tribal thought and tribal culture and were partly responsible for the decaying and death of a culture. Modern forces of change were at work beginning with 70s and they are still at work and in order to counter such a development, the tribal theologians began to speak of retaining the values of a deteriorating culture so that the Christians will remain as Naga, Garo, Khasi, Mizo and so on.

Renthly identified several theologies that developed in the two-thirds world such as the Latin American Theology, Black theology, Minjung theology, Dalit theology and feminist theology as liberation theologies.¹⁰ He recognized the indigenization of Christian theology, or tribal theology as liberation theology to certain extent because it has developed as a resistance movement to foreign Christian thought and ideas.¹¹ Thus, in Renthly’s writing, one can see a deep conviction for the indigenization of the Christian message proclaimed by the missionaries and a great concern to communicate the Good News to the tribals in a meaningful way.

He suggested several ways for this to happen. Firstly, he believed that the Bible should be translated with utmost care so that the resulting translation is accurate in the language in which it is translated.¹² The translated Bible must then become the basis for theological formulation in the languages of Northeast India. He opines:

In addition to our various oral traditions, the Holy Bible is our normative text to determine our expression of faith and practice as Christians.... The Bible shape our theology. Hence Bible translation does play a very important role in shaping the theology of a given Christian community; indeed, the Bible in a given language is the first theological textbook in a Christian community.¹³

Secondly, he asserted that an attempt should be made to understand the tribal religions of Northeast India. That is our heritage as tribals. Because of this traditional heritage we are what we are as Arunachali, Assamese, Garo, Khasi-Jaintia, Manipuri/Meitei, Mizo, Naga and Tripuri Christians. Because of this heritage, we are not American or European Christians, but tribal Christians. And so this tribal heritage must become the basis of Christianity in Northeast India.¹⁴

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.24-25

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.70

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.74, 80; See also Renthly Keitzar (ed.) *Good News for Northeast India: A Theological Reader* (Guwahati. Christian Literature Centre, 1995), p.34f.

¹⁰ Renthly, *In Search of a Relevant Message*, *Ibid.*, p.42-43

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.43

¹² *Ibid.*, p.42

¹³ Renthly, *Good News*, *op.cit.*, p.37

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.34

O.Alem

In the line of thinking that was already introduced by Renthly Keitzar, several important studies were taken up by tribal scholars in order to delve into the tribal understanding of God and heritage. As for example, one of the very first theologians to take up a study on the tribal concept of God towards the making of a tribal theology in Northeast India is Rev O. Alem who, in his monograph talks about the concept of God in Ao-Naga religion. The author claimed that the main concern of the study was to deal with the understanding of the concept of God in Ao Religion in order to meaningfully interpret the Christian concept of God. It is significant to note that the author spoke of two missing elements in the Ao Naga religion, namely, the concept of the assurance of forgiveness and the message of Christ's victory over sin.¹⁵

Wati Longchar

A year after the publication of *Tsungremology*, in 1995, Wati Longchar published his findings on the *Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity*, a revised version of his earlier edition entitled, *Tribal Religious Traditions in Northeast India*.¹⁶ The thesis of his investigation was that in the tribal worldview creation is the key and the central point of reference for understanding all realities. However, in the modern worldview creation becomes subordinate to humanity, which is the central point of reference and norm. The main concern of Wati in this study was to discover a new basis for a more sustainable future for the tribal people who are threatened by destruction of land and its resources which is the main source of life for the tribals. His theology can be regarded also as a type of liberation theology, because it seeks to liberate the tribals from the negative forces of modernization and a dominant culture which is oppressive.¹⁷

K.Thanzauva

After two years of Wati Longchar's work on *Traditional Tribal worldview and Modernity*, Thanzauva published his *Theology of Community* in 1997.¹⁸ In it, he speaks of the need of a theology of social transformation in Northeast India which must be rooted in the received biblical and theological traditions developed by Christians over nearly two thousand years, the cultural traditions of the people and the context of the people. He defines tribal theology as "...a theological reflection on the tribal Christianity experiences of the interaction of tribal culture and gospel over the past one hundred years in this region and of the struggle for liberation."¹⁹ Thus tribal theology seeks to understand the interaction of the Gospel and the tribal culture and to reflect on the experiences of the tribal people in their struggle for liberation from alienation in society and to rediscover the liberational motifs from their tribal traditions.

15 O.Alem Ao, *Tsungremology* (Mokokchung, Clark Theological College, 1994) p. vi

16 A.Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity* (Jorhat, Eastern Theological College, 1995); See also Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education* (PTCA/ SCEPTRE, 2012)

17 *Ibid.*, p.173-74; See also Mar Imsong, *God-Land-People:An Ethnic Naga Identity*, (Dimapur, Heritage Publishing House, 2011); Some other contributors to the development of Tribal Theology include: Yangkahao Vashum, "Sources for Studying Tribal Theological." In *Tribal Theology: A Reader*. Shimreingam Shimray, (ed.) Tribal Study Series no. 12. Jorhat, Tribal Study Centre, Eastern Theological College, 2003, pp 67-68; A. Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davis eds. *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Context and Perspective*. Jorhat, Tribal Study Centre, Eastern Theological College 1999.

18 K.Thanzauva, *Theology of Community : Tribal Theology in the Making* (Research and Development of Academy of Christian Studies, Aizawl, 2004)

19 K. Thanzauva, "Issues in Tribal Theology," in *Tribal Theology: A Reader*. Op.cit., p. 17

Thanzauva's book breaks new ground in the making of tribal theology. The author is of the view that amongst the tribal communities of the Northeast India, there is a common and distinctive cultural feature which can be described as communitarian. And hence the title of the book: *Theology of Community*. The concept of communitarian amongst the tribals is taken as a basis for social transformation, social ethics, ecclesiology and ecology. He opines that any contextual theology has to be a reflection upon action which should lead to further action to transform human society and individual lives.²⁰ It should lead to fundamental Christian values and beliefs and should be necessarily translatable into worship. It must be incorporated into the preaching, the hymns, the prayers and the litanies of the Christian worship. And if this is not possible, the validity of that particular contextual theology is questionable.²¹ Ultimately, the goal of contextual theology is the realization of the kingdom of God.²²

In writing his theology of community, Thanzauva has clearly kept in his mind the needs of the community, the church and society, which tribal theology must address. He asserts that a theology can be relevant only as it opens up to criticism and change- this is a direct reference to the criticism of the church as regards tribal theology. According to him, it must be open to critical self-evaluation and if necessary, to reconstruction to meet the needs of the context in order to be relevant. And so a relevant theology cannot be static.²³

Concerns and Issues addressed by Tribal Theology

From the foregoing discussion, it can be inferred that tribal theology has come a long way over the last forty years. It has addressed several important concerns and issues of the Tribals in Northeast India, namely, the importance of contextualization of theology, communicating the gospel in the tribal thought forms, retaining the good values of tribal culture in a modernized society, liberation of land from its bondage, the transformation of a society and a people which is in danger of losing its identity, and so on. The approach of doing tribal theology is different from that of Liberation theology or Dalit Theology. The latter are attempts to liberate the poor from socio-economic oppression by the rich, whether they be in Latin America or in India or elsewhere. Liberation theology is more focused in that it specifically addresses the problem of the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed and the issue

20 K.Thanzauva, *Theology of Community*. *Op.cit.*, p.83

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, p.84

of poverty.²⁴ Tribal theology is wider because it addresses a number of issues including the marginalization and the sufferings of the tribals.

Some Issues for Further Investigation

Sources for doing Theology

Yangkahao Vashum in his article “*Sources for Studying Tribal Theology*”²⁵ gives a number of resources for shaping a tribal theology, they are:

1. *Tribal traditional heritages* which are categorized under two main divisions, namely, tribal religious and socio-cultural traditions.
2. *Tribal experiences* of the people such as their suffering, violence, underdevelopment, ethnic crisis, alienation and pain which includes people’s emotional feelings, their aspirations, and hopes.
3. *Tribal history*, which is a history of struggle for liberation and records the identity of a people.
4. *Christian heritage* which includes the revelation of God in Christ in the past and also in the present history, scripture and traditions.

Out of the four sources given above, the three most used resources are the Tribal traditional heritages, tribal experiences and tribal history. The least used source is the Christian heritage which includes Scripture and Christian traditions. Although it is an accepted fact that the Bible is normative in writing tribal theology, the Bible and the Christian traditions have not been given enough space to interact with the tribal traditions. A contextual Theology that is biblically based will have credibility and relevance. Christian theology has developed as a result of reflecting on the Bible and its teachings. It is the final authority and standard for faith and practice. Renty himself was very clear on this matter. He proposed that “it is in Christ God has finally spoken and so all our heritages must be reinterpreted in terms of God’s final revelation in Christ Jesus”.²⁶ There was no proposal here for taking the cultural traditions wholesale or indiscriminately. To study and write our tribal traditions

24 Please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology. Liberation Theology developed as a Christian response to the conditions of poverty in Latin America during 1950s to 1960s. It reacted to the poverty caused by social injustice in that region. It interpreted the teachings of Jesus Christ especially the Gospel of Luke in relation to a liberation from unjust economic, political or social conditions. The context of the poor such as their suffering, their struggle and hope was the starting point for critiquing the society and of the Catholic faith and Christianity as a whole. Gustavo Gutierrez wrote one of the most famous books of the movement, *A Theology of Liberation*. Other noteworthy proponents are Leonardo Boff of Brazil, Jon Sobrino of Spain, and Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay.

Dalit theology is a branch of [Christian theology](#) that emerged among the [Dalit caste](#) in [India](#) in the 1980s. It shares a number of themes with [liberation theology](#), which arose two decades earlier, including a self-identity as a people undergoing [Exodus](#). Dalit theology sees hope in the "Nazareth Manifesto" of [Luke 4](#), where [Jesus](#) speaks of preaching "good news to the poor ... freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind" and of releasing "the oppressed". A major proponent of Dalit theology was [Arvind P. Nirmal](#) (1936–95), a [Dalit Christian](#) in the [Church of North India](#). Nirmal criticised [Brahminic](#) dominance of Christian theology in India, and believed that the application of liberation theology to India should reflect the struggle of Dalits, who make up about 70% of Christians in India, as claimed by Poor Christian Liberation Movement (PCLM). Nirmal also criticised the [Marxist](#) element within [South American](#) liberation theology. Nirmal drew on the concept of the [Suffering Servant](#) in [Isaiah 53](#) to identify [Jesus](#) himself as a Dalit – "a waiter, a [dhobi](#), and [bhangi](#)." Please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit_theology.

25 Yangkahao Vashum “Sources for Studying Tribal Theology,” *Tribal Theology: A Reader*, 67-76.

26 Renty, *In Search, op.cit.*, p.78

without bringing them to interact with the Bible and Christ, who is God's final revelation will be dangerous for the life of the church and its practice.

Researching on the tribal cultural and religious traditions have been done in the 19th century in Northeast India by the British administrators, anthropologists and sociologists who produced a number of monographs which remain to this day. These have become resource materials for understanding tribal religions and many of our tribal studies have been enriched because of these resources. In what ways are these studies on tribal life and culture different from the tribal studies that are being done today in theological circles? There are differences but also a lot of similarities.

Our studies and writings on tribal theology are different from the 19th century monographs in that today's tribal theological writings are necessarily theological reflections on the tribal culture and their understanding of God, history, religion and community life. Care should be taken in our reflection so that in our theologizing we are not carried away by something that is secondary and forget the primary. This concern needs to be pondered upon seriously by all theological researchers. Here I would like to point out some perils of theologizing for which we should be aware while doing theology:²⁷

1. Cultures are not static. They are always dynamic and moving towards hybrid cultures. This is something we cannot prevent. Without dismissing the past traditions, one can welcome and acknowledge the hybrid cultures also.
2. There is a tendency to romanticize the past at the expense of sound biblical theology.
3. Contextual theologians tend to treat the context as the norm for doing theology. Context alone cannot stand. The Bible should also be taken to interact with the context and the context with the Bible.

Tribal Theology is Christian, and it should be necessarily connected with the past, i.e the biblical text and the present, i.e the context. Otherwise there would be no tribal theology in the long run. Thanzauva speaks strongly of rooting tribal theology on the Bible, thus he points to an important methodological issue in doing tribal theology. He asserts:

Contextual theology, without ignoring the importance of scriptures and tradition, considers culture, socio-economic and political issues and the struggle of people for their liberation as important sources of theology.²⁸

He rightly claims that the question which confront us in the construction of tribal theology is how to interpret the Bible in the context of Northeast India....their context requires a re-interpretation of the Bible to address the problems that encountered their lives. Unless the tribals are allowed to be different in their interpretation of the Bible, the Bible will not only lose its significance, Christianity will remain superficial without really taking root into the tribal culture.²⁹

27 See also Rosiamliana Tochhawng, who also raises certain problems and dangers that might arise in doing tribal theology: (a) there is a danger of becoming selective from the Gospel and culture; (b) there is a danger of romanticizing the tribal worldview in an attempt to rediscover liberative motifs in tribal culture; and (c) how far these liberative motifs can be rediscovered and re-lived in the post-modern era. [Rosiamliana Tochhawng, "Methodological reflection on Theologizing Tribal Heritage in North East India," *Theologizing Tribal Heritage: A Critical Re-Look*, 26-27.]

28 *Ibid.*, p.77

29 *Ibid.*, p.121

Christology:

Christology is a neglected section in tribal theology. There is very little reference to Christ. In speaking about the person and work of Christ, Renthly proposed that for the tribals, it will be more meaningful to present Jesus as 'Christus Victor' who liberates us from evil spirits. He spoke of Christ as the victor over sin, the Conqueror of all evil spirits. According to him, this idea is already there in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus is presented as stronger than the power of the evil spirits and the demons. This message can be preached as it stands so that the tribals will be freed from the fear of the evil spirits and their influence.³⁰ He further went on to say that there is some similarity between the rituals of the Old Testament and the traditional Naga sacrifices. And so the Naga categories such as rice, pigs, chickens, eggs, cows or bulls, mithuns and even dogs can be reinterpreted to explain the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Recognizing the similarity in sending away the goat free into the wilderness for the sins of the people in Lev 16, and the releasing of the cock as a substitute for the client (sinner), to carry away sickness, misfortune or even the sins of a person in the Naga tradition, Renthly suggested that John 1:29 should be translated as: "Behold the Cock of God who takes away the sins of the world". While appreciating such creative and innovative way of translating the Bible, it is to be noted that Renthly could not explore this further neither in Bible translation nor in the actual preaching of the church.³¹

Wati Longchar also refers to Christ in his theology of land but the discussion on Christ is one-sided. As for example, in an article, he rejects the Christ of personalism. He asserts:

Since God is an integral part of creation, God suffers pain when creation suffers, because tribals conceive God as one who comes out from the soil (but not from above)...We are challenged to see Christ as the incarnate one who is organically related to the total eco-system. Jesus shares his being with the whole created order. Since Jesus Christ is an integral part of creation, all parts of creation are now reconciled to Christ. It rejects Christ of personalism....The event of Jesus Christ thus re-established the reality of 'space'.³²

Wati is right when he says that Christ as the incarnate one is organically related to the total eco-system. The danger is in emphasizing only the created order where Jesus shares his being to the extent that Christ's work on the cross of Calvary for the whole of humanity is forgotten. The Bible is holistic in its approach to the salvation of the whole world which includes both the created world and humanity in its depraved or degenerate condition. It is both universal and personal in scope.

I would like to refer to three Christological Studies done by tribal theologians. A review of these three Christologies has been done by David Blah recently.³³ First, Bendangla Longkumer³⁴ in her article on '*Weaving Christology from Tribal Women Perspective: An Ao-Naga Reading*' in *Journal of Tribal Studies* vol. 15, no. 2 of 2010, attempts to formulate a tribal Christology from the women's perspective. Her focus is on the understanding of *Arasentsur*, an Ao-Naga women shaman as the working model.³⁵

30 *Ibid.*, p.23

31 *Ibid.*, p.24-25

32 Wati Longchar, *Journal of Tribal Studies*, Vol V, No.I (January –June, 2001) p.13

33 Please see, David Blah, "Tribal Christology" [https:// www. Academia.edu](https://www.Academia.edu) for a review of these Christologies.

34 See Bendanglemla Longkumer, "Weaving Christology from Tribal Women Perspective: An Ao-Naga Reading," *Journal of Tribal Studies*: Vol 15. No 2 (July-December, 2010) pp. 29-45.

35 David Blah, "Tribal Christology" <https://www.academia.edu>

An *Arasentner* ('*arasentsur*' being feminine and '*arasentner*' masculine) is a social functionary who, with the help of a guardian spirits, attains ecstasy to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of her/his group members. And as a social functionary, *Arasentsur* is defined not merely by extraordinary personal abilities to achieve ecstasy, communicates with spirits, or affect the healing of individuals but also a public capacity to mediate between a transcendent reality and a particular social group, and also to act as intercessors and counselors within the group. Thus *Arasentner* is a medium which helps human enter into relationship with the spirit world, nature and among human community, and were also well respected and honored by everyone in the community. It is noteworthy that they are also the specialist in the use of herbal medicines as revealed to them by the spirit and so they are medicine women, doctors and healers.

Basing on this tradition of the *Arasentsur* the tribal's women's image of Jesus could be meaningfully developed and understood, and from this Longkumer draws out one point of theological reflection:

Jesus as Arasentsur heals- One of the prominent features in the ministry of Jesus is healing of the people with different sickness, which affects not only the individual's body, mind and soul, but it re/establishes their relationship with God, their community and the environment around them- thus a holistic healing. In the same way the *Arasentsur*'s healing of the sick is also a holistic reconciliation and restoration of the individual with the spirits, the socio-religious customs and the others within the community. The faith-based healing of Jesus is comparable to the trust-obedient-based healing of the *Arasentsur*.

The second study is a Christological exploration by me in 1998.³⁶ I have tried to articulate a contextual tribal Christology from the *Ao-Naga*'s folktale tradition of the '*Lijaba and the two sisters*'. The story is about two poor orphan sisters, who was orphaned by their step-mother and their father, who lived in the outskirts of a village in a small hut. On one night *Lijaba*- who is believed to be the creator of the world and the God of the fields and who disguises himself when he comes to each and every village annually so as to bless his people- came, in the form of a beggar, and knock on all of the villager's doors for a night's rest but all of them refused him say that they did not have any room to spare or something else. Finally he came to the two sisters' house. Though not having much they invited him in. He prepared the supper that night for them all and later blessed their small field with harvest and cursed all the others. Only later the rest of the villagers, on seeing what had happened realized that it was *Lijaba* who had visited them that night.

The social setting of the tale and the actions of *Lijaba*, are important for today. When one compares the *Lijaba* tradition with the Gospel accounts of Jesus teachings and ministry such as the parable of the sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31-46; the parable of the Choice of Guest in Luke 14:12-14; the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24, and; the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman in John 4:1-28- three points can be laid down for theological reflection:

- a. *Jesus as Lijaba co-suffers with the poor-* Jesus takes an option for the poor in order to suffer for them and to dwell with them. Takatemjen says that because the tribals are suffering from oppression the Christological importance must be found in this reality of suffering with the marginalized, or else Jesus will have no significance to them. To call Jesus as *Lijaba* is to meaningfully communicate that He is suffering together with the marginalized *Nagas*, and it is the most appropriate symbolism of this identification.
- b. *Jesus as Lijaba liberates the Oppressed-* Jesus as *Lijaba* offers the hope of freedom to the outcaste of the lands as the heaven to which Christ is leading the poor and the oppressed is a

³⁶ See Takatemjen, *Studies on Theology and Naga Culture* (Delhi/ Mokochung: ISPCK/ CTC, Aolijen, 1998), 55-68.

kingdom in this world where justice, food and life prevail. *Lijaba* not only recognized with the poor but in the midst of the sisters' poverty and shame as being the outcaste of the village he blessed them and his blessing is seen as a liberational act as it was the outcaste and not the main villagers who was worthy to receive it. A Christology for today for the Nagas should not be devoid of a liberating praxis but it must be strong enough to liberate them from everything that enslaves, whether they are socio-economic, political or spiritual forces.

Thirdly, Hemhochon Chongloi also did a Christological study in his book³⁷ *Indoi: A study of Primal Kuki Religious Symbolism in the Hermeneutical Framework of Mircea Eliade*. He articulates the relationship between *Indoi symbolism and Kuki Christology* and utilizes the concept of *Pathen* in bringing out a certain aspect of Kuki Christology. For him, Kuki religiosity can be condensed in the institution of *Indoi*.

Pathen in the primal Kuki religious world is understood as the creator, sustainer of all in the universe, and just like the Brahman of Sankara who is also unavailable and remote. The remoteness of *Pathen* is overcome through the instrumentality of creation, every object- animals, vegetations, and inanimate objects- being potential hierophany.³⁸ But it is the institution of *Indoi* that the concept 'became concretized'. The *Indoi* symbolizes the manifestation, revelation and accessibility of the sacred, and the immanence of *Pathen*. In as much as *Indoi* is hung in every household the presence of *Pathen* is assured for every individual person. Thus the *Indoi-Pathen* relationship functions just like the *Christ-God* relationship whereby through the incarnation, God becomes Immanuel through Christ. Just as the whole Christ-event has become a living experience of God in Christ, the institution of *Indoi* has become a prolongation of the sacred manifest in the material objects that constituted it.

David Blah observes that, Chonhloi's *Indoi-Pathen* similarity with *Christ-God* is peculiar and explicit, whereas for Bendangla Longkumer's *Jesus as Arasentsur*, the similarity is not so explicit and the parallel is read into the tradition. However, this little variation in the traditions is of little importance to the Tribal theologians as their primary aim is to develop a particular Christology from their own tribal heritages.³⁹ According to David, in the Christology of Takatemjen, a more developed and properly formulated Christology can be seen which is both synthetic and praxis, thus providing a Christology that is not only 'dressed' in one's own culture but also providing the basis for liberative actions.⁴⁰ However, the Christologies of the other two are still lacking in this respect. Though, methodologically, they have synthesized the understanding of Christ but yet they have not properly developed any liberative implications.⁴¹

In another study, Johnson Thomaskutty, a faculty of Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, critically assess the interpretations of Jesus by Yangkahao Vashum. He observes that the interpretation of the rooster as a representative of Jesus in the Northeast context fails to locate the ontological significance of Jesus' vicarious death in comparison to the local phenomenon of the rooster sacrifice. He asserts that there is a danger in matching Jesus and rooster in synonymous terms.⁴² The comments made by David Blah and Johnson Thomaskutty need to be given some serious reflections by tribal Christology

37 See Hemkhochon Chongloi, *Indoi: A study of Primal Kuki Religious Symbolism in the Hermeneutical Framework of Mircea Eliade* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 284-287. Originally a doctoral thesis titled 'A Historical-Phenomenological Study of Primal Kuki Religious Symbolism with special reference to *Indoi* in the Framework of Mircea Eliade's Interpretation of Religious Symbolism' which was submitted to the Senate of Serampore College in 2004.

38 From the two Greek words- *Hieros* meaning 'sacred' and *Phainein* meaning 'to show'

39 David Blah, "Tribal Christology" <https://www.academia.edu>

40 Please see David Blah, "Tribal Christology" <https://www.academis.edu>

41 *Ibid.*

scholars, not only for the study of Christology but also for other Tribal studies so that methodologically our articulation will be right but not haphazard.

Methodology

Some methodologies employed by tribal theologians for doing tribal theology are mentioned briefly in this section. K. Thanzauva and L.H. Lalpekhluva suggest a synthetic-Praxis model. By this they mean a combination of two models, namely, the synthetic model, and the praxis model. Synthetic model has to do with the combination of the teachings of Gospel and the tribal traditions- and the praxis model refers to the formulation of right actions for the transformation/liberation of the people. Thanzauva opines that the “combination of the two is necessary in a society like ours, suffering as it does from a crisis of identity, at the same time struggling for liberation from all forms of alienation.”⁴³

Mention can be made of several studies that combines the synthetic model and praxis model: Eyingbeni Humtsoe-Nienu’s articles in *Nagas: Essays for Responsible Change* employs this methodology. The articles are: “De-masculinizing God: Reclaiming the Inclusive Meaning of God in Tribal Tradition”; “Women’s Experience of ‘Sorrow’: Ending the Saga of ‘Headhunting’”; “Resources from Naga Tradition and Religion for Building Communities of Peace and Justice” ; “Naga Women’s spirituality toward Wholesome Theological Anthropology”.

Several women theologians have taken a feminist approach and started writing in Northeast India for liberation of women from various kinds of bondage. R.L.Hnuni criticizes the present church structure which have deprived women of equal participation in the church. She opines that a re-interpretation of the Bible is necessary in order to bring a change in the mindset of the church.⁴⁴ Eyingbeni asserts that the idea of female inferiority is advocated by wrong interpretation of Bible and Theology which is also compounded by the Naga traditional attitude of valuing the male more than the female. This has resulted in dividing humanity into two separate, irreconcilable parts: that of female and male. She points out four levels of equality between the genders from the perspective of theo-biblical anthropology, namely, equal in being; equal in status and responsibility; equal in sin and equal in redemption.⁴⁵

Most women writers in Northeast India have turned to the Bible for dealing with the issue of oppression of women by the patriarchal Naga society, for the simple reason that in order to tackle the

42 See Thomaskutty, Johnson, “Reading Jesus Paradigmatically into the Northeastern Indian Tribal Context” in *New Testament Scholarship Worldwide*. See <https://ntscholarship.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/reading-jesus-paradigmatically-into-the-northeastern-indian-tribal-context/>

43 Thanzauva, *Tribal Theology: A Reader*, 19. However Rosiamliana Tochhawng, a professor of Theology in Aizawl Theological College, raises certain problems and dangers that might arise in this methodology: (a) there is a danger of becoming selective from the Gospel and culture; (b) there is a danger of romanticizing the tribal worldview in an attempt to rediscover liberative motifs in tribal culture; and (c) how far these liberative motifs can be rediscovered and re-lived in the post-modern era. [Rosiamliana Tochhawng, “Methodological reflection on Theologizing Tribal Heritage in North East India,” *Theologizing Tribal Heritage: A Critical Re-Look*, 26-27.]

44 R.L.Hnuni, “Women in the Context of the Bible and Mizoram”, *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective*, Edited by K. Thanzauva (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989) pp. 72-79

45 Eyingbeni Humtsoe-Nienu, “Naga Women’s spirituality toward Wholesome Theological Anthropology” in *Nagas: Essays for Responsible Change* (Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House, 2012) pp.93-105; See also Eyingbeni Humtsoe-Nienu, *God of the Tribes: Christian Perspectives on the Naga Ancestral Idea of the Supreme Being* (Clark Theological College, Mokokchung, 2014)

problem of discrimination in the tribal society, traditional material is very scanty to support the case for women in terms of emancipating them.

Wati Longchar articulates a methodological shift from the human-centric to a creation-centric methodological approach in articulating a tribal theology of creation, especially the *land*, as it is the foundation of history, existence and identity- for it not only “sustains and nourishes all beings...[but] ...gives them an identity and selfhood”⁴⁶ and thus should not be sidelined.

Apart from the examples given above there are other models of doing contextual theology which are equally useful. Many times it is not possible to classify the approaches rigidly. The models often overlapped one another.⁴⁷ At the present juncture in the history of development of tribal theology, I am convinced that the “synthetic-Praxis” model will be more useful and effective. By ‘synthesis’ we mean a combination of gospel and the tribal cultural traditions. The end result of such a ‘synthesis’ will be a contextual theology that will be intelligible to the people. As theologians our concern is not just producing an armchair theology that will have no relevance for the people. What we write should transform our church and the society at large. And therefore we must emphasize ‘praxis’ in our theologizing. When we pray the Lord’s prayer saying ‘Thy Kingdom Come’, ‘Thy will be done on earth’, are we not praying for the kingdom’s values, justice, peace, wholeness, shalom and salvation to come to a world where there is so much of brokenness? Our theology should be also praxis -oriented.

Conclusion:

Christianity in the Northeast India is about 180 years old. Soon after the arrival of the missions, the tribals in the Northeast India were taught the three R’s: Writing, Reading and Remembering. Mrs Mary Mead, one of the first teachers in the Naga Hills taught her pupils to write with fingers on the sandy soil, then using sticks to write on banana leaves at Molungyimsen about 140 years ago. The open air classes were conducted for the purpose of helping the natives to read the Bible. Since then, Christians in the Northeast India have walked a long way: from learning to learn the Bible on Sundays, they went on to learn more about it during Bible Class held three to four times in a year in the mission centres. And then, Bible Schools and later Theological Colleges were established in the region for the purpose of ‘Reading the Bible.’ After about 180 years of the establishment of Christianity in the NEI, today we are talking of another R: Re-Reading the Bible contextually. As noted above, earlier theologians like Renthly Keitzar were concern about how to communicate the gospel better by using tribal categories for the benefit of the tribals. As a result, today we are talking about tribal theologies.

Re-reading the Bible has become necessary and it is important for the life of the churches in Northeast India. By re-reading it, the Bible will become more relevant and more meaningful to us. The Bible should be made to speak to our world today and it can be done only by re-reading it. In re-reading the Bible we pay attention to the context seriously and try to use our own traditions and cultural resources for understanding a particular text more clearly. By reading the Bible in this way, we can bring new understandings to the word of God. But it is also true that reading the Bible together with our cultural traditions can transform the tribal understanding of Christ, our communities, and the socio-economic problems we are facing today in the region,

⁴⁶ Wati Longchar, “Indigenous People’s Theologies in Asia: Methods and Perspectives,” *Issues in Theological Research: A Methodological Exploration*, edited by Wati Longchar (Bangalore: BTESSC/ SATHRI, 2010), 160. (147-169)

⁴⁷ K. Thanzauva, *Community, op.cit.*, p.84

The proponents of tribal theology since the 70s have tried to use tribal resources such as the oral traditions, folklore, stories and songs as much as possible in developing a tribal theology in Northeast India. The Theological fraternity in Northeast India should be thankful to them because in this process of theologizing we have come to understand tribal cultures and their traditions with new eyes and with depth. All Christian theologies have a basis in the written word, the Bible. As John Macquarrie has said: "...any theology which claims to be Christian theology... must maintain close and positive relation with the Bible".⁴⁸ In this regard, we need to learn from the Dalit theologians and also from the Liberation theologians, who were convinced about their call and *praxis* from a reading of the Bible. In all theological reflections, the Bible has played a very important role in the past. And today we must pay attention all the more to read the Bible in theologizing. All our theologizing should be balanced in the sense that while giving attention to the readings of the tribal traditions, it is equally important to refer to the Bible as a source also for understanding tribal culture and traditions in a new way.

It is because of such concerns that a few biblical scholars gathered together at different times and discussed the need of having a biblical scholars society in Northeast India (NEISBS) which was formally approved by the general body meeting held at Clark Theological College in May 2014. It is thought that such a society will be able to contribute and complement the developing tribal theological discussions more deeply and more meaningfully. The theological task before us is tremendous and a useful enterprise. I have tried to lay bare some of the issues and concerns in doing tribal theology today. I do not have all the answers to all the questions raised. It is for all Tribal theologians to approach the problems unitedly keeping in view the needs of the church and society whom we serve. Tribal theology have come a long way and we have a long way to go. The future of this enterprise depends on how we walk. In order to walk long, we need to walk together.

48 John Macquarrie, *Principle of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1977) p.10

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